Disjunctive constellations: on climate change, conjunctures and cultural studies

Article (Accepted Version)

DISJUNCTIVE CONSTELLATIONS:

ON CLIMATE CHANGE, CONJUNCTURES, AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Ben Highmore

Abstract

The planetary scale of climate change challenges forms of conjunctural analyses that are based around the scale of national politics and culture. Global warming insists on planetary dimensions and invites us to treat humankind as a species that has developed a taste for fossil fuels. Critical Cultural Studies, and the human sciences more generally, seem founded on the principle that culture and society has historically worked to differentiate humans, and that the task of a critical practice is to investigate this process within and across specific geographical locales. How do we reconcile what seems to be an unreconcilable difference between Cultural Studies and climate change? Below I argue that alongside the necessary work of conjunctural analysis we should remember that the critical human sciences have other capacities that are more suited to negotiating the monstrous diversity of scales that global warming and the micro cultures of the everyday articulate. Alongside conjunctural analysis I argue for the relevance of an approach that would posit 'disjunctive constellations' as objects for attention. While it might seem counter-intuitive, the disjunctive constellations I have in mind are at once more modest and (potentially) more expansive than a conjuncture. In my understanding, disjunctive constellations are not in opposition to conjunctures; they may well be the critical kernel at the heart of a conjunctural sensitivity.

Keywords: Timefulness; Global Warming; Constellations; Historical Imagination; Cultural Studies

---

This essay has one overriding concern: how might cultural enquiry sensitize itself to the historical condition of the Anthropocene, and how might this alter the practice of a field such as Cultural Studies? To put the question slightly differently: how might the practice of conjunctural analysis, which many commentators take to be the defining mode of attention for Cultural Studies, accommodate the wild temporal dissonance signalled by the Anthropocene? This is hardly a new concern and might be a central

question framing intellectual fields such as the environmental humanities and the energy humanities. Indeed, Imre Szeman, one of the key exponents of the energy humanities, figures temporal dissonance in the following way:

> We could never have been modern except for our access to coal, oil, and gas, which provide us with an unprecedented amount of cheap energy. Everything we have come to associate with modernity – from its characteristic speed and contraction of space, to its technologies and infrastructures – is possible only as a result of our access to these remnants of ancient life.[1]

It is this wild orchestration, where the long history of the modern (the cultural scene of the Anthropocene) is thoroughly dependent on the pre-human life of fossil fuels, that holds out an invitation to Cultural Studies, while asking it to expand its historical imagination.

Thirty or so years ago, during the period of Cultural Studies' global expansion within higher education, the current situation of climate crisis might have resulted in a plethora of edited collections, anthologies and monographs announcing a distinct Cultural Studies approach to the issue. That this doesn't appear to be happening today might tell us something about the institutional contraction of Cultural Studies (and its disciplinary osmosis and absorption by more traditionally secure disciplines), but it might also tell us something about the imaginative affordances of the way Cultural Studies has often been practiced. It is of course not true that Cultural Studies has remained inactive in facing the climate crisis. In a special issue of the journal *Cultural Studies* (now over a quarter of a century old) Jody Berland and Jennifer Daryl Slack argue that while 'Cultural Studies meets the environment rather well prepared to clarify the complexities of the interrelationship of the act of making the *subject* of the environment and of making it an *important* subject' it is 'rather less prepared to handle the "problem" of the "physical substance"' of the environment.[2] Their journal issue goes on to attend to that physical substance (of earth, water, weather), while not losing

[1] Imre Szeman, 'Energy, climate and the classroom: A letter', in *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities*, edited by Stephen Siperstein, Shane Hall, and Stephanie LeMenager, Routledge, London, 2017, p46.

[2] Jody Berland and Jennifer Daryl Slack, 'On Environmental Matters', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1994, p1.

sight of way that representation is also a physical presence that has significant affects and effects and at times planetary consequences.

While this is not the place to offer an exhaustive account of the range of Cultural Studies' engagements with environmentalism and global warming, it might be the case that the sort of critical reflexes that Cultural Studies developed in the 1990s were not particularly amenable to an approach to environmental concerns.[3] In that same issue of *Cultural Studies* McKenzie Wark reminds us of the huge influence exerted by Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, which starkly announced on its first page that 'Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good'.[4] Cultural Studies' preoccupation with the contemporary, often means that its historical scale is determined by quite recent human history. This is the scale of the conjuncture, and its political expediencies. To consider the deep time of the Anthropocene and its antecedents, might require temporarily foregoing the political rationality of conjunctures for the more unmanageable and oceanic frame of a disjuncture. It is not, of course, a question of either/or, but of investigating what could happen when the historical scale of Cultural Studies is exploded.

TIME SIGNATURES AND CONJUNCTURES

The idea of the conjunctural is one that the human sciences have made various attempts to configure. For Ernst Bloch, trying to understand the moment when modernity vomits-up something as atavistic and sadistic as National Socialism alongside endless technological modernizing, required an understanding that people are simultaneously living different historical trajectories. He called this 'non-synchronous simultaneity'. For Bloch; 'Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others.'[5] A historical moment might always involve the immediately

[3] A full literature review of Cultural Studies engagement with environmentalism would have to reserve a central place for Alexander Wilson's *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992. Wilson, who died in 1993 from AIDS-related illnesses, was a cultural studies writer, a landscape architect and an activist.

[4] McKenzie Wark, 'Third Nature', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1994, p121. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991.

[5] Ernst Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics' (1932), translated by Mark Ritter, *New German Critique*, no. 11, Spring, 1977, p22.

simultaneous, but this doesn't mean that this a synchronised moment. A seemingly more systematic treatment of a non-synchronous simultaneity was offered by Louis Althusser in an important chapter in *Reading Capital*, subtitled 'Outline of a Concept of Historical Time'. Althusser imagines a social totality consisting of 'different structured levels', which all exhibit a 'relative autonomy' to each other yet become part of the 'unity of a conjuncture' because the economic structure is determining 'in the last instance'.[6] Too many bytes have been expended debating economic determinism to tempt me to add to that cache here. Of more interest to me is Althusser's ability to imagine a heterogenous slice of historical time where each level moves at its 'own' speed and rhythm:

> […] we have to assign to each [level] a *peculiar time,* relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the 'times' of other levels. We can and must say: for each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of productive forces; the relations of production have their peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way; the political superstructure has its own history…; philosophy has its own time and history…; aesthetic productions have their own time and history…; scientific formations have their own time and history, etc. Each of these peculiar histories is punctuated with peculiar rhythms and can only be known on condition that we have defined the *concept* of the specificity of its historical temporality and its punctuations (continuous development, revolutions, breaks, etc.).[7]

We don't need to agree with Althusser's allocation of disciplinary levels (politics, philosophy, science, art, economics) to catch the drift of his historical rhythmicity; a multitude of peculiar rhythms, orchestrated at various times and rates by continuity, by breaks, by local punctuations. And while he is at pains to distance himself from the Annales School of historians, he is clearly indebted to their trenchant refusal of history

---

[6] Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster, Verso, London, 1979, p99.

[7] Ibid, pp99-100. Square brackets are mine; the other ellipses are in the original, as is the italicization.

as a linear series of events (one damn thing after another) set against unfolding, homogenous time.

It was Fernand Braudel (name-checked in Althusser's chapter) who, in the preface to his monumental study of the Mediterranean that he first published in 1949, offered one of the most vivid invocations of historical time as a multiplicity of interlacing tempos and durations. In his preface he writes about how the problematic of taking a complex geographical site as an object of history led him to scour materials provided by 'anthropologists, geographers, botanists, geologists, technologists'.[8] Braudel was writing history at a time when the usual object of history was political diplomacy, and so by taking the environmental conditions of place seriously he brought what he thought of as a geological sense of time to a discipline usually primed for the day to day negotiations of human agents (a week is a long time in politics, as the saying goes). If the environment has a history it doesn't have the same sort of history as diplomacy; they have different beats. It is here that Braudel describes three different rates of historical change. The slowest is the famous *longue durée*: 'a history whose passage is almost imperceptible, that of man in his relationship to the environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles'. This is a history that is fashioned out of rocks and earth, trees and crops, rain and ice. It is fashioned out of cycles of weather and slowly changing agricultural practices. Alongside this, or on top of this is 'the slow but perceptible rhythms' of social history 'of groups and groupings.' These are 'swelling currents' of changes that can be registered over a lifetime or a generation: changes in social attitudes and institutions; in politics and economics. Quickest is 'History on the scale not of man, but of individual men – that is the history of events: surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs. A history of brief, rapid, nervous fluctuations, by definition ultra-sensitive; the least tremor sets all its antennae quivering.'[9] For Braudel, historical attention has been overly caught by these surface disturbances (discoveries, inventions, diplomacy, politics) and needs to take heed of much slower recalibrations of human life and planetary history. As might seem fitting for a book named after a sea, Braudel's historical imagination is based on a series of aquatic analogies; his is a tidal

[8] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II: Volume I*, translated by Siân Reynolds, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p18.

[9] Ibid, pp20-21.

world. He imagines choppy seas and underlying currents, cresting waves and slow, fathomless drift. In musical terms it is an orchestration of epochal drones, lilting melodies, and frenetic syncopations. To stop it sounding simply cacophonous the historian needs a way of listening that can hear the rough music of our poly-temporal existence.

There is then a relatively long history to trying to grasp the simultaneous temporal complexity of a conjuncture, of the conjunctural. Indeed, the term names that quest. But I mention these writers now not simply to pay due diligence to intellectual history, but because these writers don't simply address a problem and offer a solution, their writings also embody a set of problems. And while these problems are not new, they are newly urgent. With Bloch and Althusser, the problem is familiar: the logic of lags and advances, of primitives and progressives, is an issue of teleology, where temporal characteristics and values are secured through a tacit agreement of the path of history towards an imagined future, even if that future is a utopian hope. With Althusser there is also the problem of complexity: not as a knotted understanding that knowledge can only ever be partial, but as a will-to-totality whereby the assemblage of the present *can* be known through the (potentially infinite) labour of mapping and connecting. Taking his cue from the structuralism he was associated with it is the privileging of the synchronic over the diachronic. For Althusser, to understand the conjunctural meant undertaking a synchronic analysis of the social totality, seen as endlessly complex and fashioned (as in a geological slice) of different temporal bands (politics, art, and on and on). Here any one moment is a vast network of interlacing strands held together by the heuristic of the 'last instance'. It is hard to imagine the sort of systematised thinking that would be able to map this in its entirety. Perhaps this is the dream of complexity that drives the digital humanities, or the one that underpins the current drive for interdisciplinarity (often valued today as funded collaborations between settled disciplines)? For the strain of Cultural Studies that I'm most partial to, the idea of complexity has always been more modest, more critical, more interruptive.

And lastly there is Braudel's sense of different modes of history, running to their own characteristic time signatures: the slow, glacial labours of the environment and the tempered rhythms of the seasons, repeated tirelessly over centuries; the relatively faster alterations of social history that still take decades to accomplish; and hurtling around 'on top', the frenetic, often furious, altercations that we still call 'the news'. Today such an understanding of temporal consistency is immediately put in peril by the latest

'freak' weather event. Today glaciers aren't an emblem of unswerving constancy but are being lost to global warming. Today it is the environment, the climate, that is increasingly behaving with the unpredictability and frothing nervousness of event-time. And how do we understand the accumulated accomplishments of social-time when social programmes that have taken decades to build can be recklessly abandoned, seemingly at the stroke of a pen? And how are we to understand the actions of specific men and women, when some of their actions take generations to unfold? How do we understand historical events, that Rob Nixon characterises with the oxymoron 'slow violence'?[10] How do we register the temporality of an 'event' such as the Union Carbide methyl isocyanate gas leak in Bhopal? The night of 2-3 December 1984 names the date of the leak, but it was already 'anticipated' by maintenance practices that preceded that night and by decisions to produce pesticides going back decades, and its violence is still being felt today, thirty-five years later.

How do we plot the conjunctural under these circumstances? And is 'plotting' what we need to do? Does the conjunctural, as a synchronic moment of simultaneity, help or hinder our ability to bare witness to slow violence, to the political dynamics of environmental histories that bear the stigmata of colonial histories? How do we register the conjunctures of sudden eruptions of weather, of toxic seepage and build-up (chemical toxicities, gendered toxicities, racialised toxicities), alongside the many modernities and their freedoms that have been built on a carbon economy enacted as the depletion of planetary time stored as coal, gas, and oil? The conjunctural as imagined by Althusser required, at the very least, a momentary settled distribution of time parcelled-out into relatively discrete sites. Such a distribution was probably always an abstraction, an abstraction which our current climate history is revealing as increasingly untenable. For Andreas Malm:

> At its core, then, climate change is a messy mix-up of time scales. The fundamental variables of the process – the nature of fossil fuels, the economies based on them, the societies addicted to them, the consequences of their combustion – operate over seemingly unrelated temporal spaces, all refracted in the moving, elusive present of a warming world; in an elevated sense of the

[10] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

> term, every *conjuncture* now combines relics and arrows, loops and postponements that stretch from the deepest past to the most distant future, via a now that is non-contemporaneous with itself. Ours is, if anything, an epoch of diachronicity.[11]

The time of a tree, which is a result of recent photosynthesis, is not the time of a piece of coal, which is the result of archaic photosynthesis. Seen from the perspective of the environment, time isn't something that is most productively related to human scale: if carbon emissions ended tomorrow the seas would continue heating up for hundreds of years, because the carbon that has already been emitted have not yet finished *its* work.

TIMEFULNESS

Braudel was right in wanting to expand our historical consciousness of time, but perhaps the *longue durée* he imagined wasn't quite long enough. According to the geologist Marcia Bjornerud, we need a *timefulness* that can accommodate geological, planetary history: a history that can accommodate rocks, plate tectonics, oil and coal, and mass extinctions. Bjornerud undertook her doctoral research in the mid-1980s, in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard where 'the Ice Age had not yet loosened its grip', and where there was 'no official time'.[12] What would it be like to expand our timefulness while thinking conjuncturally? Would we notice that the emergence of a national clock time, in England, coincided with the exponential expansion of the railways in the 1840s?[13] And that this manifestation of unified, homogenous time required the burning of, ancient fossilised carbons. Or put slightly differently; that a quickly expanding human modernity was fuelled, not by the pre-modern, but by the *pre-human*? When Bjornerud was researching her PhD in Svalbard, in Britain, mineworkers

---

[11] Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso, London, 2016, p8.

[12] Marcia Bjornerud, *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Save the World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2018, p3.

[13] The classic work connecting time and industrialism is E. P. Thompson 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present*, no. 38, 1967, pp56-97. See also Richard Biernacki's useful 'Time Cents: The Monetization of the Workday in Comparative Perspective', in Roger Friedaland and Deirdre Boden, eds. *NowHere: Space, Time and Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, pp61-94.

and their families, heroically struggled to save their jobs by undertaking a year-long strike. They didn't succeed and, in the years following the end of the strike, coal pits across the country closed. Communities that had grown over centuries, where workers had dedicated themselves since the late eighteenth century to extracting carbon minerals that the earth had worked to produce over millions of years ('between 1150 – 350 million years'),[14] were decimated within a decade.

To register the geological dimension of the miner's strike isn't to demote an ideological understanding of the strike that saw it as a fight between the free-market fundamentalism of Thatcher and the collective bargaining power of what was once the most effective union in Britain; it is, instead, to historically situate that understanding on a larger canvas of energy, class and politics, and to connect ideology to the materiality of energy. The geological actuality of mining would not, of course, be news to any actual miner; it would be inscribed on their bodies, in their lungs, in their physical dispositions. The socio-geological aspect of mining was lived as a conflict between defending and improving an often deadly form of labour (striving for better wages, better working conditions and safety precautions, safeguarding jobs) and ensuring that the next generation could escape such lethal conditions.[15] While the immediate circumstances of the early 1980s required striking to safeguard jobs and refuse pit closures, the long-term future being imagined and fought for was not a scene of working class bodies enduring underground mineral extraction, generation after generation, for eternity.

There is a political geology to the miners' strike that helps clarify why the Conservative government was able to take on and win what was often a pitched battle with the National Union of Mineworkers at that specific moment. If we follow the argument made by Timothy Mitchell in *Carbon Democracy*, we can recognise that different energy supplies have very different political affordances. Mitchell positions the strike within a history spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

> The widespread use of coal gave workers a new power. The movement of unprecedented quantities of fuel along the fixed, narrow channels that led from

[14] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, Verso, London, 2011, p12.

[15] See the final section of Lucy Robinson's brilliant essay 'Thoughts on *Pride*: No Coal Dug', *Open Library of Humanities*, 5, 1, 2019, p37. https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.317/

> the coal mine, along railway tracks and canals, to factories and power stations created vulnerable points of passage where a labour strike could paralyse an entire energy system. […] In the second half of the twentieth century, governments sought to weaken this unusual power that workers had acquired by an equally simple engineering project: switching from using coal to using oil and gas. […] In Britain, […] the development of nuclear power stations and the oil and natural gas fields of the North Sea provided government planners with the means to end the country's dependence on coal for generating electrical power. The Conservatives were able to reopen the war against the miners in 1984 with a new round of pit closures.[16]

The social geology of different forms of energy (the flexible rerouting of global oil and gas supplies, for instance, compared with the defined routes of coal supplies) connect to different class politics (pipeline sabotage and community demonstrations versus large-scale labour disputes). This history of energy politics is also (as mentioned above) part of a much longer history of energy where coal, oil and gas all supersede energy supplied by contemporaneous forms of photosynthesis (foods, wood) and wind.

It is the duality of scales (human time and planetary time) and their incommensurability that has recently concerned the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. In a clutch of essays published over the last decade Chakrabarty has been trying to weigh the epistemological challenge of climate change for work in the humanities. For a historian emerging out of the debates around Subaltern Studies and postcolonialism (and as someone who took a leading role in those debates) climate change doesn't simply trump his other concerns. What emerges in Chakrabarty's writing is the collapse of a distinction that would separate human history from natural history, and the concomitant 'challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once'.[17] But this sense of multiple and incommensurable scales requires an account that can be sensitive to the varied capacities of carbon extraction. For instance, it would mean recognising that human freedoms were won for 'anthropological' or

[16] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, pp. 236-7. Mitchell points out that the strike while severely wounding the NUM didn't kill it; the fatal blow was dealt by MI5 with their false allegations that the NUM leaders had misappropriated funds from Libya.

[17] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Crises of Civilization: Exploring Global and Planetary Histories*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, p223.

social humans on the basis of fossil fuels, while this extraction and consumption made us geological agents bent on designing our own demise. Historically, then, the use of fossil fuels is never a straightforwardly good or bad practice but is one with incommensurable effects. Chakrabarty, writes that:

> The Anthropocene may stand for all the climate problems we face today collectively, but it is impossible for me, as a historian of human affairs, not to notice that this period of so-called great acceleration is also the period of great decolonization in countries that had been dominated by European imperial powers and that made a move towards modernization (the damming of rivers, for instance) over the ensuing decades and, with the globalization of the last twenty years, towards a certain degree of democratization of consumption as well. I cannot ignore the fact that "the great acceleration" included the production and consumption of consumer durables – such as the refrigerator and the washing machine – in Western households that were touted as "emancipatory" for women. Nor can I forget the pride with which today the most ordinary and poor Indian citizen possesses his or her own smart phone or cheap substitute. The lurch into the Anthropocene has also been globally the story of some long-anticipated social justice, at least in the sphere of consumption.[18]

For Chakrabarty, as for scholars working in the sphere of what is being called the 'energy humanities', our energy futures, if they aim to have any social justice, will have to negotiate the need to mitigate planetary warming while redressing massive energy inequalities.[19] Wrapped up in the million and millions of years of energy fossilisation are capacities for freedom which if distributed with the task of combining justice with the global lessening of fossil fuel consumption, would mean that over-developed countries particularly would need to completely recalibrate their energy ecology.

---

[18] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories', *Critical Inquiry*, 41, 1, 2014, p15.

[19] See, for instance, the introduction to Imre Szeman, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy*, Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019. For an overview of the 'energy humanities', see Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.

What is of particular interest to me here, is that Chakrabarty uses the term 'disjuncture' and 'disjunctive' to describe the challenges that the historical imagination faces in the wake of dual forces of postcolonial globalisation and global warming:

> If critical commentary on globalization focuses on issues of anthropological difference, the scientific literature on global warming thinks of humans as constitutively one – a species, a collectivity whose commitment to fossil-fuel based, energy-consuming civilization is now a threat to that civilization itself. These views of the human do not supersede one another. One cannot put them along a continuum of progress. No one view is rendered invalid by the presence of others. They are simply disjunctive. Any effort to contemplate the human condition today – after colonialism, globalization, and global warming – on political and ethical registers encounters the necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory.[20]

For Chakrabarty, then, the duality of a species perspective (humankind as a distinct, energy hungry species) and an anthropological purview (where humankind is endless differentiated by class, age, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, and so on) is fundamentally irreconcilable. It will result in a disjuncture rather than a conjuncture (from the perspective of analysis). What, then, follows from such a position? How do we fashion a human science that is attentive to both the level of natural history and human history?

DISJUNCTURAL AND CONJUNCTURAL CONSTELLATIONS

In his useful introduction to a previous issue of *New Formations*, a double issue that was also dedicated to a discussion of the role of conjunctural analysis, Jeremy Gilbert explains how a conjuncture 'is composed of specific configurations of emotion, attachment and trauma as much as economic and institutional relationships', he also stresses that a 'conjunctural analysis is never a straightforward exercise in periodisation,

[20] Chakrabarty, *The Crises of Civilization*, p224.

it is always concerned with the identification of continuities and discontinuities on multiple scales'.[21] For Gilbert, conjunctural analysis characterises the work of Cultural Studies when it most firmly wedded to a political sociology eager to search out current opportunities for socialist advances and most acutely aware of present dangers. In this light, Cultural Studies as a form of conjunctural analysis is charged with the task of strategic mapping, with the mission of providing a critical account of the social totality. As Gilbert (and Lawrence Grossberg in the same issue) make clear: while conjunctures are real relations of power, they don't simply exist out there in the world; they are partly the result of the interests and judgements of the analyst. It is the analysts' evaluative acumen, their synthesizing abilities (which also includes their sweep of historical knowledge and the scope of their cultural references) that are going to profoundly affect (and effect) the resultant conjunctural description.

This is important work and difficult to achieve convincingly. But its general impossibility (as a project of mapping the totality) is also worth registering. Althusser's sense of the conjuncture as a map of interlacing and sometimes interlocking, relatively autonomous spheres already suggests a totalising project that could defeat even the most capacious polymath. If we add to this Chakrabarty's insistence on the irreconcilable but deeply entangled combination of natural history and human history, what then becomes of the project of conjunctural analysis? We could return, as is often useful, to the example of Walter Benjamin, who similarly refused the division between natural and human history, but who's ambitious mapping of culture achieves some of the same work as conjunctural analysis.[22] Benjamin worked, not from an idea of the conjunctural, but from the more modest (and surreal) sense of the explosive constellation. A constellation, for Benjamin, was connected to his method of montage, which wasn't simply an artistic technique designed to conjure up unnerving juxtapositions but was the living condition of existing within a complexly layered world of modernising impulses that were characterised by amnesia, by unfulfilled promises, and unrealised dreams, and archaic returns that punctured any claim for progressive social civility. Constellatory thinking in Benjamin wasn't only a practice of drawing out connections between and

[21] Jeremy Gilbert, 'This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall' *New Formations*, 96/97, 2019, pp13-14.

[22] Benjamin's most methodological writing is found in 'Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress': Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp456-488.

across phenomena, it could also be a practice of recognising the multiplicity of times within a single item. In his short account of Marcel Proust's writing, Benjamin claims that at the heart of Proust's world is 'the universe of convolution [of intertwining]': of multiple times threaded into a single thing or scene. For Benjamin, Proust's work 'has brought off the tremendous feat of letting the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration in which things that normally just fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash is called rejuvenation'.[23] In 'convoluted time', eternities, epochs, and instances, cluster, clash and dissolve in the materiality of life.[24]

A recent example of what a constellatory approach to culture studies might entail, is given in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, with its hauntingly ambivalent subtitle: *On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Tsing's book starts out with a particularly pungent mushroom – the matsutake mushroom – growing amongst the forests of Oregon's Cascade Mountains, foraged by refugees from Laos and Cambodia, and sold for surprisingly large amounts of money in Japan. Montage, in this scenario, is not the outcome of the surreal predilections of Tsing, but of the violently surreal permutations of history (with its trenchant intermingling of natural and human histories). The stories that get told resist becoming reducible to 'findings', because the accounts of lumber production in the Pacific Northwest and its attendant ecologies, the displacements of Mien people by the Vietnam war and other 'upheavals' (from China through Laos and Cambodia), the fate of matsutake in a nuclear age and the taste for the mushroom itself don't reconcile themselves into a coherent picture. The book, in Tsing's words is 'a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs.'[25] It doesn't fully cohere (it isn't meant to), but it does compel.

---

[23] Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust' [1929] in *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1982, p211. see also Graham MacPhee, 'Glass Before its Time, Premature Iron: The Unforeseeable Futures of Technology in Benjamin's Arcades Project', *New Formations*, 54, 2004, pp74-90.

[24] Michel Serres demonstrates a similar understanding of time in his discussions with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, translated by Roxanne Lapidus, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995.

[25] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015, p4.

I find such montage work deeply attractive. For one thing it begins in amongst things (in *media res*): wherever we are. It begins with the messy, untamed coincidence of the materials that we, as researchers, often find but are also quick to dismiss if they don't quite fit. Within a culture that overvalues rigour and easily-digestible findings, it asks us to notice what doesn't quite connect: 'what if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systematicity we seek?'[26] Tsing champions an art of noticing, for a project that finds fragile and ephemeral assemblages, that open out onto blasted histories. Some of my current work looks at the post-1945 adventure playgrounds that emerge on bombsites in cities like London, Bristol and Liverpool, on waste-ground in New Towns (like Milton Keynes and Harlow) and in the New Town expansion of already established towns (such as Crawley and Peterborough). Sensitised by Tsing's work I am learning to notice more. I was already on the look-out for any overlaps between playground and discussions of 'juvenile delinquency', but what I am starting to see is concurrent but disconnected ideas about 're-wilding' (the reclamation of the bombsites by a wild nature) and the sense of childhood re-wilding (against the passive obedience of paternalistic and submissive culture). I'm catching sight of a hazy three-dimensional Venn diagram: where a new petrol-fuelled wildness is making city streets death-traps for the children still playing there, who haven't yet learnt the lesson that automobiles are all too willing to teach; where the deadly fogs of London are killing thousands of people in one single December month in 1952; where 'transitional' land (bombed and yet-to-be rebuilt) is dedicated to saving children from parents and adults whose default response would often be 'no'; where an attempt to open a South London adventure playground for disabled Children is resisted because it is perceived as ugly and as devaluing house prices. The built environment is a long accumulating activity; the policing of families, another. These rhythms are syncopated by the explosions of bombs, of wild laughter, of the slow perspicacity of the play workers. And across all this is the insistent snap that marshals these energies for the purpose of the emerging 'Real Estate State'.[27] One way that some of this vision momentarily crystalizes is, perversely, when I refuse the constraints of current framings of the 'environment' and return to the much more unsettled idea of the environment that was

[26] Ibid, p20.

[27] Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*, London: Verso, 2019.

current in the 1960s and 1970s, which could include street life, advertising, pollution, traffic, schools, parks and media.

The adventure playgrounds, that emerged in the 1950s belong to a conjuncture – the same one that witnessed the emergence of the Welfare State. Indeed, seeing it as part of this conjuncture extends our understanding of the Welfare State and finds it in these more informal (less State-based) enclaves of amateur play work and of the adventure playground movement's ethos of robust self-governance ('better a broken arm than a broken spirit').[28] To see the adventure playground as part of a disjunctive constellation is not to refuse its place within a conjuncture, but it is to notice a different sense of history, of how the past and the present might be made to intermingle (a history of explosives alongside child psychiatry; the atavism of play alongside the changing policies of local authorities). It also suggests that we shouldn't leave the past alone as we get on with the injunction to attend to the 'bad new things.' There are unfinished stories there that need to speak to us now; there are unspent energies here that should be tapped.

THE TIGER'S LEAP INTO THE PAST

Within the rich inheritance of Marxism, time receives some peculiar figurations. In Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the possibilities for truly liberatory social change are cast in an almost impossible light for the historical imagination. For Marx the past needs to be sloughed off, once and for all, because the 'tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living':

> The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.[29]

[28] This polemical phrase belongs to Lady Allen of Hurtwood. It is slightly misleading given the amount of effort that went into establishing safe practices within the movement.

[29] Karl Marx *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1885, in *Marx/Engels: Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, p96 and 98.

It is, of course, an impossible challenge and one that simultaneously negates and proves the strength of historical determinism. The limits and pressures of our world are provided by our historical inheritance: to go beyond that requires a leap into the unknown. This is Marxism wanting to bet on the liberatory and progressive potential of an unknown future. By the time that Benjamin was writing his more Gothic and disenchanted Marxism that gamble on the future seemed less amenable: the revolutionary zeal of capitalism proved constantly able to 'let the dead bury their dead'.

In Convolute N, the methodological engine for his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin writes: 'overcoming the concept of "progress" and overcoming the concept of "period of decline" are two sides of one and the same thing'.[30] Is it possible to overcome progress and decline? Doesn't our political energy pulse to these rhythms? As Tsing suggests, today while we might be sceptical about 'progress' and 'modernity' (or highly critical of the implied imperialism they convey) such, 'categories and assumptions of improvement are with us everywhere'.[31] University life, for instance, is threaded through with practices and values of improvement (improving student experience, improving feedback, grading, teaching methods, and so on), and many of us have had several decades of being involved in, and sometimes also initiating, these 'improvements'. Yet simultaneous with this drive to '*excellence*' we can also feel – in both tangible and intangible ways – that things have got 'worse', much worse.

In an essay describing her project of studying global change in the English village that she was born in, Vron Ware writes: 'My way of knowing it was marked by a temporality that insisted that an older "way of life" was inexorably coming to an end – even if "the end", already underway when I was born in the 1950s, seemed to have no beginning'.[32] Ends without beginnings might be a structure of feeling common to anyone living under the revolutionary zeal of capitalist modernization, it is certainly a common feeling when studying twentieth century cultural history. A sense of entropic decay pervades all sorts of discourses to the point where it often seems to be

---

[30] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p460.

[31] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p20.

[32] Vron Ware, 'Cheap chickens and ethical eggs: the place of an English village in the world', *Writing Otherwise: Experiments in Cultural Criticism*, edited by Jackie Stacey and Janet Wolff, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013, p107.

constitutive of their discursive mood (it is hard to find, for example, any left-leaning approach to higher education that isn't built on a sense of the university in ruins). But if a sense of an ending without a beginning is endemic, is the opposite also possible: a sense of a beginning without end?

From the perspective of a Cultural Studies, sensitized to the irreconcilable scales of diplomacy and fossil fuels, and the whole gamut in between, the history that we call modernity is one explosive and unending interregnum. In energy terms there was never a complete global move from wood, wind, and food to coal, gas and oil. On this massive scale of energy history transitions are never complete. In Gramsci's famous formulation: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannon be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.[33] Of course Gramsci is referring to specific transitions in the authority of dominant classes and hegemonic blocs. But from the perspective of the history of colonialism and its aftermath, alongside the geological agency of the human species, morbid symptoms might be another name for Benjamin's insistence that 'there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.[34] At the same time there may well be forms of planetary stewardship from the past that need to be restored not as an attempt to recreate 'the good old days', but as practices much more attuned to care, and much less amenable to exhaustive forms of extraction.

If we follow Tsing and Benjamin and refuse the lure of progress and decline can we still rescue a sense of the unfinished (and unfinishable) task of a disjunctural *and* conjunctural analysis. To get a sense of the possibilities here it is worth returning, finally, to the work of Stuart Hall. After all it might be that there is always a disjunctive kernel within the conjunctural shell of the social. This is Stuart Hall describing a conjunctural shift to the sociologist Les Back:

> What I thought was that Thatcherism was really the end of one configuration – the post-war settlement – and the beginning of something else. […] But about my sense of that break, people do ask me, 'How do you know of that?' I can't

[33] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971, p276. The phrase is the title of a recent work of conjunctural analysis: Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born*, London: Verso, 2019.

[34] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' (1940), in *Walter Benjamin selected writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, p392.

> tell them that. It's not a precise methodology; it's not something which I apply outside to it. It's interpretive and historical. I have to feel the kind of accumulation of different things coming together to make a new moment, and think, this is a different rhythm. We've lived with one configuration and this is another one.[35]

Any methodological procedures that we could extract from this short description would need to attuned to the words 'feel', 'accumulation', 'things', and 'rhythm', as well as to the recognition that historical interpretation (from Hall's perspective) is wrought from experience and the distillation of observations rather than applied from the outside as though the social world were a text that needed decoding. These are ordinary terms freighted with methodological significance and pointing as much to the sensorial as to the ideational, suggesting both a sensitivity to changes at the level of social aesthetics and to registers of value, compassion, and expenditure. To be aware of the disjunctural in the heart of the conjunctural would require not simply an attention to dominant political rhetoric, but to direction and flows of energy, to changes in taste, to distributions of time, to orchestrations of the senses.

It is this attentiveness to shifts in mood, to alterations in flows and direction of energy, that is key to the sort of disjunctive constellations and 'felt' conjunctural analysis that I think can be attentive to the multiple challenges and emergencies of today. The *outcome* of a conjunctural analysis seems like a writer getting on top of things: Stuart Hall's description of how a conjunctural feeling emerges suggests that it starts when a writer gets in amongst things.[36] Hall recognises and feels new, different rhythms as the 1970s slip into the 80s. The changing rhythms that Hall notices in the 1980s are relevant to my story of adventure playgrounds. Many of the adventure playgrounds that were operating at the end of the 1970s were closed down in the 1980s as an initiative that had invested in people changed to an attitude that was more accommodating to real estate priorities. A disjunctive constellation could start here:

---

[35] Stuart Hall and Les Back, 'In Conversation: At home and Not at Home', *Cultural Studies* Vol. 23, No. 4, 2009, p665.

[36] I'm borrowing this formulation from Steven Connor's project of cultural phenomenology: 'whatever interpreting and explication cultural phenomenology managed to pull off would be achieved by the manner in which it got amid a given subject or problem, not by the degree to which it got on top of it'. Steven Connor, 'CP: or, A Few Don'ts by a Cultural Phenomenologist', *Parallax*, 5, 2, 1999, p18.

with the closing down of an adventure playground, with adolescents jettisoned from what were potentially sanctuary spaces. It could also connect to much larger stories of wood and petrol, of spaces dedicated to amateur carpentry becoming spaces that were determined by petroleum driven transport. And these stories cross the Atlantic, with tales of car manufacturing, of different ideas of freedom (the freedom of the playground, the freedom of private vehicles). Such a disjunctive constellation would be open to Paul Gilroy's

> … plea to consider the specific forms of freedom promoted and withheld where car culture has shaped a racialised and segregated polity. The outcome represents a diminution of citizenship, and it is associated with a privatisation that confiscates the possibility of collective experience, synchronised suffering, and acting in concert. In these circumstances, the automobile becomes the instrument of segregation and privatisation, not an aid to their overcoming.[37]

Our urban spaces are fashioned out of petrol and diesel fumes that are millions of years old; out of the long histories of freedoms 'promoted and withheld'; out of the teeming affects that course through our city streets in the patterns of fear and excitement, of anxiety and ease.

CODA: LIVING ON BORROWED TIME

> Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.[38]

[37] Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, p22.

[38] Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"' (1940), in *Walter Benjamin selected writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p402.

We are living at a time of multiple and competing emergencies. How are we going to find the imaginative and practical resources to creatively and critically respond to a world simultaneously experiencing the developments of a climate catastrophe; the rise of far-right populism; widespread and intransigent forms of misogyny, racism, homophobia and transphobia; a global reconfiguring of imperial powers and class dynamics; and an electronic ecology that endlessly colonises our world, and our sense of worldliness? Each of our current emergencies has a rhythm and a political 'brightness' about it that simultaneously illuminates and casts shadows, synchronises and generates temporal dissonance: what sort of concerns can we muster about the environment when faced with the immediate urgency of racist violence; what becomes newly visible about sexism in the apocalyptic light of global warming? While a conjunctural approach to historical time is charged with the goal of being able to connect the temporalities of these emergencies into some form of comprehensible orchestration, a disjunctural approach suspends the satisfaction of comprehension in the name of something whose potential remains untested.

To put the issue as directly as possible: how do we articulate and analyse the condition of living across multiple rates of change? And to put the matter in its current, disquieting light: how do we articulate multiple rates of change as a series of connected and disconnected emergencies? This is the issue that a conjunctural approach to culture and society at once both highlights and promises to address. It is both an age-old question and one that is always historically sensitive, constantly finding in the specificity of the historical, new orchestrations of speeds, rhythms and durations. Sometimes manners change faster than plumbing; sometimes it is the other way around. The idea of the conjunctural suggests a snapshot of a complex arrangement of rates of change seen from the perspective of something like eternity. The conjunctural is constitutionally connected to the disjunctive and highlights the way that a moment in time is always a mixture of scales and durations: the vast and the infinitesimal and the various points in between. We simultaneously live on a planet, on a continent, in a country, in a series of rooms. We live from second to second, animated by memory and desire, we live a specific stage of the life course (adolescence, senescence, etc.), we live an epoch, we live the history of our species-being, and we live a planetary history that has only hosted humankind for a tiny period of its existence. Recognising our dependency on fossil fuels for our freedoms and our sense of modernity should be the recognition that we have been living quite literally on borrowed time.

This essay set out with a modest aim of wanting to increase the imaginative capacities of Cultural Studies in the direction of a different form of timefulness for thinking about conjunctures and disjunctures. To be clear: there is no claim here that such timefulness will result in better custodianship of the earth. Nor is the aim to critique the forms of conjunctural analysis that Cultural Studies has rightly prided itself in performing. In the face of so many emergencies the space for experimentation might be shrinking. In placing a wager on our long-term survival, I want to reserve a space for the wild scales of the disjunctural.

Thanks to Jeremy Gilbert and Scott McCracken for providing useful feedback.